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European social and regional funds must prioritise digital skills investments

European social and regional funds will have an instrumental role in fostering the adoption of the digital skills needed for the European society to prosper. DIGITALEUROPE calls on the European Commission as well as on national and regional authorities to prioritise digital skills across all programmes within the European Social Fund+ and the European Regional Development Fund for 2021–2027.

Economies across Europe are undergoing an unprecedented digital transformation. It will require a step change in skills development to equip Europeans of all social and demographic groups with the basic, medium and advanced digital skills they need in both their private and professional lives, and move from being digital users to becoming digital creators.

Projects supported by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) – Europe's main instrument to invest in human capital – and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) – whose aim is to strengthen economic and social cohesion in the EU – reach millions of Europeans every year in every EU Member State.

We call on the European Commission, national and regional authorities to prioritise digital skills in every domain of programmes designed to implement the ESF+ and the ERDF for 2021–2027.

40% of Europe's workforce teleworked during the COVID-19 crisis¹. 90% of future jobs will require digital skills.² It is increasingly clear the prosperity of EU countries will depend on their ability to adopt basic and advanced digital competences.

Both the ESF+ and the ERDF must now see digital skills as vital to achieve a stronger, cleaner and inclusive economy.

¹ Euronews, [Coronavirus: Is working from home going to be a legacy of lockdown?](#), 2020

² World Economic Forum, [Jobs will be very different in 10 years. Here's how to prepare](#), 2020

The ESF+ and ERDF's Operational Programmes (OPs) and the projects selected under them should focus on:

- ▶ **Flexibility:** fostering flexible digital skills upskilling and reskilling opportunities for all (regardless of the employment situation, age, education level or profession). Current and future employees need to continuously update their skills and acquire new skills to better navigate the labour market.
- ▶ **Upskilling:** encouraging companies, especially SMEs and start-ups, to invest in training of their employees, as well as supporting companies at regional and local level to develop and nurture internal talent, instead of looking elsewhere.
- ▶ **Employability:** enabling effective employability programmes focused on digital skills development at medium and advanced levels. This is key to helping convert digital users into digital creators.
- ▶ **Market reality:** the real market cost of ICT training (in person or remote/online) is high, and not always can this be solved by a series of online webinars. The OPs and rules applicable to projects need to reflect market reality as much as possible for quality assurance and efficient skills validation.
- ▶ **Quality assurance:** guarantee a high level of quality assurance in the training provided. Relevant public or private entities should ideally authorise or certify digital skills training programmes which should comply with European standards (such as the European e-Competence Framework and/or industry-led certification etc.).
- ▶ **Partnerships:** facilitating close partnerships with the private sector (potential employers, private education and training providers). These ensure that training is market-relevant and enable a faster, more efficient transfer of technology and know-how from industry to academia and education institutions. They also provide learners and educators with the type of market-ready skills that local employers are precisely looking for.
- ▶ **Train-the-trainer courses:** mandating the training, coaching or additional education of teachers, educators and trainers. Enabling 'train-the-trainer' programmes will ensure skills proliferation at scale.

COVID-19 has accelerated digital transformation to a level that few could predict. We have all experienced how the digital skills gap has impacted businesses' and organisations' recovery strategies. Hence, facilitating an efficient digital transformation today is a default strategy to achieve a better future tomorrow.

The ESF+ and the ERDF need OPs and project eligibility rules that reflect the reality of the market and the EU's broader ambitions of a green and digital transition, not just national, regional or local considerations. This is crucial for the ESF+ and ERDF to live up to their digital upskilling potential.

DIGITALEUROPE and its members remain at disposal to support all these efforts. We will be delighted to connect with all relevant stakeholders and discuss what we can do together to achieve the ambitious digital goals of the EU and each Member State.

For more details, please see [DIGITALEUROPE's Position on EU funding for digital skills in the next EU budget 2021-2027](#) and our specific [recommendations for the manufacturing sector](#).

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About DIGITALEUROPE

DIGITALEUROPE represents the digital technology industry in Europe. Our members include some of the world's largest IT, telecoms and consumer electronics companies and national associations from every part of Europe. DIGITALEUROPE wants European businesses and citizens to benefit fully from digital technologies and for Europe to grow, attract and sustain the world's best digital technology companies. DIGITALEUROPE ensures industry participation in the development and implementation of EU policies.

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